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ABSTRACT

Historically, gymnastics has held a place in school curriculums based on its contribution toward physical well being. Over the last several decades gymnastics has been presented as a dichotomy between Olympic gymnastics and educational gymnastics. Unlike the games program which may encompass upwards of 65 percent of the time allotted to physical education, gymnastics instruction is on the decline. In an effort to return gymnastics to its rightful place in the curriculum, a program called "Gymnastics in Schools" will be presented. It is based on the work of John Wright and Bob Smith, gymnastics specialists from England. "Gymnastics in Schools" emphasizes the development of body management skills for all levels of ability. The three main movement themes are travelling, statics, and rotation. The work of Laban is critical to the expansion of gymnastics theses because body, space, effort quality, and relationships concepts are included as process variables. The intent of this paper is to present a brief background and theory of gymnastics in schools and to provide suggestions for developing a gymnastics unit based upon this approach. (JD)

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Gymnastics in Schools

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Over the last several decades gymnastics has been presented as a dichotomy. On the one side has been formal or Olympic gymnastics. It begins with stunts and simple tumbling experiences such as a frog stand/tip up, or forward roll and leads progressively into more difficult skills such as a handstand or handsprings. While all school age children begin in this system and it is quite popular in years following the Olympics, the fact is that standards for performance are set at a level that only the elite are encouraged to progress. They go on to become our gymnasts, cheerleaders and divers. The average and below average soon get discouraged, afraid and drop out.

The second approach to gymnastics has been labeled informal or educational gymnastics. It is based on Laban's movement framework with the content focusing on eight themes including the body, space, time, relationships of body parts, weight, flow, relationships to others and rhythm. This approach to gymnastics seeks versatility, individual inventiveness and originality through a problem solving approach. Standards of performance focus on refinements of skill through an awareness of the body, space and other movement factors. Solutions to movement problems allow individuals to challenge themselves within their own ability level. Falling within the scope of movement education programs, this type of gymnastics approach has never fully been grasped by enough teachers to see it widely implemented in school physical education programs.

As a result, gymnastics programs are at a cross-road. Unlike the games programs which may encompass 65% or more of the time

allotted to physical education (Thorpe, et.al., 1984), gymnastics is dying. Because of safety/liability problems associated with gymnastics, some schools are eliminating gymnastics. Others are cutting their programs severely.

With such a long history of having an important place in the physical education curriculum, it is imminent that we take a long hard look at the real potential for gymnastics and how it can be developed in a way that it can regain its status (or at its worst dies a dignified death).

To eliminate this cycle of failure for teachers and students as well as to return gymnastics to its rightful position in the curriculum, "Gymnastics in Schools" emphasizes body management skills based on skill themes. The emphasis is upon assisting students to obtain a range of movement skills and develop an understanding of the principles and forces that influence their bodies in stillness and in motion. These skills enable children to act and react to the environment around them by controlling their bodies in predictable as well as unpredictable situations. They are better able to respond at a level of competency that reduces the risk of injury and minimizes the use of manual assistance or spotters during performance.

The benefits of developing this awareness and movement competency is applicable far beyond the scope of gymnastics floor work and apparatus work, however. Students possessing body management skills are empowered to make good decisions about how, when, and where to place the body and its parts in relation to equipment, to space, and to others, and to understand the choices

and consequences of their actions. These decisions are fundamental to all physical education content.

The criteria for good form and skillfulness are equally as important as individual exploration and choice in developing body management skills. Within the scope of gymnastics content, students of varying abilities are challenged to extend themselves to ever increasing levels of difficulty while maintaining control. Accommodating individual differences within a single class is facilitated as students respond to tasks that permit a high level of success and, with practice, continued improvement.

The framework for gymnastics in schools consists of three broad categories or skill themes (Smith, 1988) (See Figure 1). Each of the skill themes contributes to the skill, physiological, cognitive, aesthetic, creative and psychological development of students.

First and foremost, students learn the skills of gymnastics (See Figure 2). Travelling includes all methods of locomotion. Runs, jumps, other forms of step like actions such as travelling with the hands and feet, rolls and sliding actions are included. These whole body actions can be used in a warm-up or conditioning phase to elevate the muscle temperature and increase heart-rate or included in floor and apparatus work to show contrast with non-locomotor movements. Flight is also included as an aspect of travelling with a focus on take-off and landing. Body shape, effort, and relationships to other people and to equipment (the process variables) are used to expand traveling actions and will be further developed in another section of this article.

A second key concept of gymnastics is that of statics. Static positions are learned using different bases of support with emphasis on stillness. Examples are the shoulderstand, handstand and headstand. Students learn to move into and out of these held positions with smoothness or flow. Variety is encouraged with respect to body shape, effort actions and relationships which occur between body parts, with equipment and with others. Balances, which are unstable positions held firmly, are included with hanging and supporting positions in this category.

Rotation is the third skill theme which is emphasized. Rotation is considered in each of the three body planes--forward, backward, sideways (left, right) and vertical (around), rolls, cartwheels and turns in the air ($1/4$, $1/2$ whole) are considered. Students are taught principles of motion about an axis. When and how to tuck to increase spin, and when and how to extend to decrease spin and stop are important ideas which transfer from skill to skill. Variety is again encouraged with respect to body shape, effort actions and relationships.

In addition to skill development students should be given ample opportunities to experience gymnastics in a setting which is conducive to physiological, cognitive, aesthetic, creative and psychological development. Strength (particularly upper body), flexibility and cardio-respiratory endurance are important physiological factors which are emphasized through a program with this approach. Cognitively, students gain a working knowledge of their muscles, develop an understanding of a complex movement vocabulary and learn to make decisions and solve problems based on

resolving open ended gymnastics tasks. Students also learn basic principles of motion and body mechanics such as the concept that shortening the radius will increase the rate of spin/rotation. Aesthetically, students learn routines that consist of a beginning, transitional movements which flow from one to another and an ending. Style with an awareness of body shape, line, design and the relationships with other people and to the apparatus also creates a further awareness of aesthetic factors. Students are often asked to initiate or resolve a movement task with a movement of their own choice or to change a movement by changing arm/leg positions or another factor such as direction, or time. This encourages unique solutions to movement tasks which places an emphasis on critical thinking and creativity. Psychologically students learn to overcome fears and develop courage by mastering new skills, taking a skill mastered on the mat onto a piece of apparatus and increasing the difficulty of a given skill. In turn feelings of confidence and success are fostered.

Unlike previous approaches to gymnastics in which singular stunts or skills are the primary emphasis of a given lesson (forward roll or cartwheel) or the emphasis is on a specific Laban theme (use of space, shape, time), the emphasis of "Gymnastics in Schools" is on linking actions or transitions which flow from one action to another. Thus, in any given lesson, while one skill theme may receive major emphases, one or both of the other skill themes will be used to support lesson development. For example, students learning to perform rolls may link two different rolls

together with a balance (roll, balance, roll). Students focusing on travelling actions may jump, jump, jump with a turn or shape, land and resolve the movement with a balance, only to begin again (jump, jump, big jump (turn, shape) land, balance, begin again).

Important to the idea of linking actions is the concept of a sequence. All gymnastics work should have a beginning, middle and end. The beginning may be a held position of readiness or a balance pose which is a signal that the gymnast is about to begin. The middle consists of the action phase in which all work is linked together aesthetically with an emphasis on good lines, smooth flow from one action to another and a focus on the important aspects of the work. The ending position is a clear stop, a signal that the work is completed.

Rudolph Laban has been credited for his contribution to the analysis of movement in the development of a framework including body, space, effort quality, and relationship concepts. Superimposing these process variables onto the travel, statics, and rotation themes provides an expansion of the gymnastics movement vocabulary for students of all ages and skill levels (See Figure 3).

Body Aspect

Identifying body parts that can support the body, lead the action, and apply or receive force are decisions that students can be challenged to make. For example travelling taking weight on hands and feet might take the form of consecutive bunny hops or cartwheels. Parts of the body that are not bearing weight become free limbs that can be used to initiate the next action with

emphasis on smooth transitions or flow within the sequence.

Creating shapes while in the air can be challenging if emphasis is upon good form and preparation for control in landing. Curling into a round shape, stretching into a straight or wide shape, twisting into an angular or twisted shape are examples of body actions that can stimulate kinaesthetic awareness of the body in flight. Floor and apparatus work require moments of stillness interspersed with action and attention to the shape of the body or a position of a limb in space can foster aesthetic appreciation.

Balancing requires bases of support that can hold the body weight in an unstable position. The four common body bases, standing, sitting, kneeling, and lying provide a stable surface for exploration into and out of balances. Supporting the weight on one, two, three, or more body parts requires appropriate degrees of muscle tension to maintain moments of stillness. Balances performed on the floor can then be transferred to apparatus work with elevation adding to the level of difficulty.

Rotation around three axes of the body (up/down, side/side, and through the middle) create twisting, turning, and rolling actions. These whole body actions can be developed as variations in the skills themselves, and eventually, as linking actions that combine with travelling and statics to form a sequence. Ways to move into and exist out of rolls are innumerable. A backward roll, for example, might begin as a shoulder balance with the knees dropping over the head and existing onto two knees, or one knee or two feet.

Space

Directions, pathways, and levels are the spatial elements most applicable to gymnastics in schools. Travelling and rotation skills move the body forward, backward, sideways, up and down as well as left, right and diagonal. Selecting a pathway in which to perform a sequence of actions encourages children to link together appropriate directions for the body to move. For example, "Jump, roll, then travel taking weight on hands" may lead to a zig-zag, straight or circular pathway. Practice along straight lines during floor work will facilitate the transfer of skills and sequences onto benches and beam.

The body can be held or moved through a range of levels from very low to very high and incorporating level changes into a sequence of actions helps a student to create variety and aesthetic appeal in his responses. As well, changes in levels apply to body parts in relation to each other. For example, "Make a balance in which your feet are at a higher level than your hands" may result in a shoulder balance, a headstand or even a handstand.

Effort

Effort qualities consist of time, space, weight and flow in various combinations. Travelling and rotation themes can be developed using contrasts to enable the student to experience the same skill with different temporal and/or spatial emphases. For example combining a sequence of rolls together might include showing changes in time (sudden/fast; sustained/slow), or in space (direct/flexible). Balances require a firm tension in certain muscles and inverted balances require tension to align adjacent

body parts. In addition, moving through a sequence of actions requires changes in weight (firm; less firm) as the body changes from periods of stillness to movement. Finally, a task to emphasize the elements of flow would focus on bound/stoppable and free/ongoing actions.

Relationships

Travelling, rotations, and statics with relationship to equipment are included within the apparatus phase of a lesson as on expansion, continuation, or contrast to floorwork activities. Moving over, under, around or along equipment that could include benches, mats, ropes, beams, climbing frames, boxes and bars provide an opportunity for students to incorporate these objects into a sequence of action.

In conclusion, "Gymnastics in Schools" is an approach that enables the teacher to plan meaningful experiences for students in each lesson of a gymnastics unit. Inherent in this approach, however, is the understanding that body management skills require frequent re-visitation and practice at ever increasing levels of challenge and difficulty. An on-going commitment to the importance of gymnastics in the physical education program is therefore essential.

Selected References

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Smith, B. (1988). Schools Gymnastics - Guidelines for Initial Teacher Training, University of Technology, Loughborough, England.

Figure 1

Gymnastics in Schools

Skill Themes of Gymnastic Content

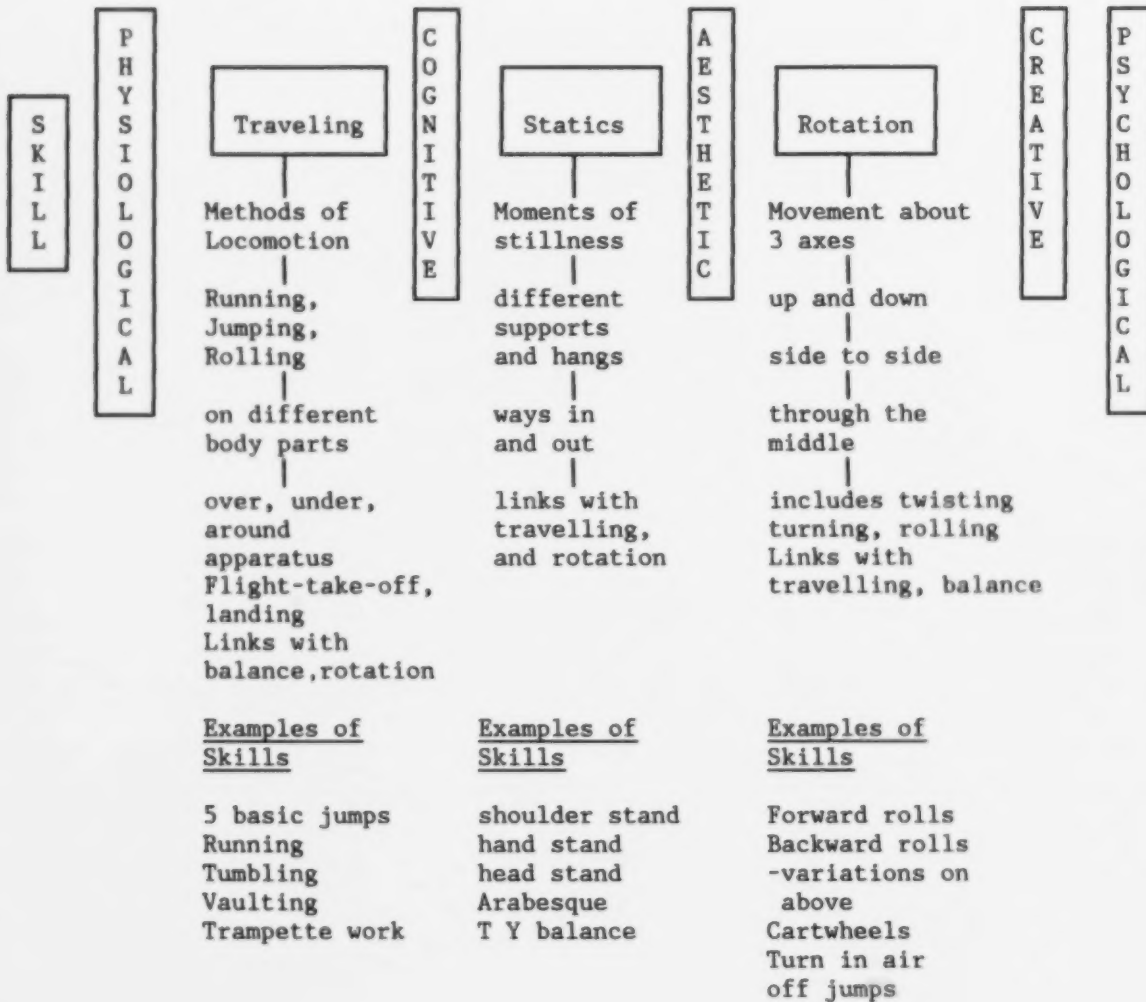
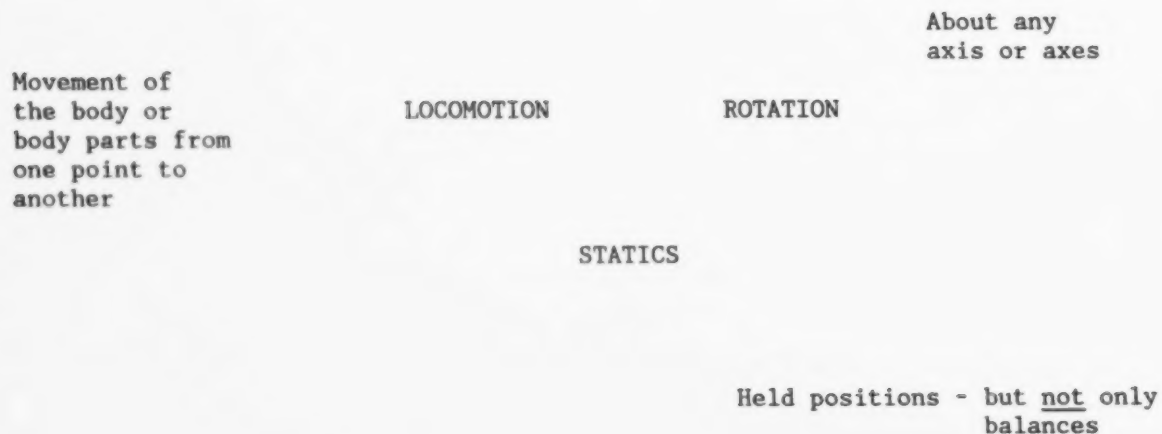


Figure 2 Areas of gymnastic content



'Rotation' may commonly be thought of as 'rolling' but movement about any axis may be included. Rotation on apparatus-around a rope, circling a beam, is also a necessary inclusion.

'Statics' make the novice teacher immediately think of balances, that is, relatively unstable positions held firmly, however stable positions should be included here as well as hangs and supports.

Figure 3

The Content and Process of Educational Gymnastics

Gymnastics Actions	The Process Variables
1. <u>Locomotor</u> Movement - The Traveling Actions.	- The Body Aspects.
a. Stepping and wheeling actions: feet, hands and feet, hands only, other body parts.	a. Part(s) receiving, bearing weight or producing force.
b. Rolling.	b. Body Shape.
c. Sliding.	c. Twisting, turning and spinning actions.
d. Gripping and releasing	d. Stretching and curling.
2. Stillness -- Weight Bearing -- <u>Balancing</u>	- The Space Aspects of Movement.
3. Weight Transference; <u>Rotation</u>	a. General Space and personal space.
a. Rocking and rolling	b. Levels: high, medium, low.
b. Sliding	c. Directions: forward, backward, sideways, up-down.
c. Step-like actions	d. Pathways: floor.
d. Flight	e. Extension: near, far.
	- The Dynamic Aspects of Movements.
	a. Speed: fast and slow.
	b. Weight: heavy (strong) and light.
	c. Flow: bound and free, stoppable and ongoing.
	- The Relationship Aspects of Movement.
	a. People.
	b. Equipment